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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SHANGHAI 000458

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DEPT FOR EAP/CM, INR/B AND INR/EAP
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TAGS: PGOV PINR EINV ECON KIRF CH

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S VISIT TO CHINA'S FIRST MEGACHURCH

REF: SHANGHAI 347

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CLASSIFIED BY: Clark Randt, Ambassador, U.S. Embassy, Beijing,
Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During a July 9-13 visit to Hangzhou, Ambassador Randt discussed religion and religious freedom with the leadership of China's only Protestant "megachurch". During the church visit, church leaders discussed the growth of Protestantism in China and Zhejiang, noting that there are 1.5 million Protestants in Zhejiang alone. Growth among Protestants is so fast that the state-sanctioned Church is having a difficult time keeping pace with the construction of new meeting places and can not train new pastors fast enough. End summary.

A Really Big Church

¶2. (SBU) On July 9, Ambassador Randt visited Hangzhou's Chongyi Church where he met with Reverend Deng Fucun of the Zhejiang China Christian Council and Reverend Joseph Gu Shibo to discuss the growth of Protestantism in China. Chongyi Church is China's first and only mega-church. According to Gu, the church is large enough to seat 6,350 parishioners. When it opened on May 5, 2005, the church recorded weekly average attendance at around 2,000 people. That number has doubled over the past two years.

¶3. (SBU) Reverend Deng said that Chongyi Church is the largest church in mainland China and, to the best of his knowledge, the largest within the greater Chinese community, including Hong Kong and Taiwan (Reftel). Although Zhejiang is small in terms of overall population, it has a disproportionately large number of Protestants. With 1.5 million "believers," Zhejiang ranks number 3 of all of China's provinces. In Zhejiang, believers are relatively prosperous due to the province's rapid economic development. Consequently, Chongyi has been able to build such a large structure. The cost of construction was 42 million RMB (approximately USD 5.6 million), 98 percent of which came from congregation members.

¶4. (C) Reverend Gu relayed that Chongyi had competed with a major German corporation for the land rights where the church stood. Chongyi was only able to offer 6 million RMB (approximately USD 800,000) for the property, whereas the Germans offered the government over 100 million RMB (approximately USD 13.4 million). The German company was also planning on investing 200 million RMB (approximately USD 26.8

million) into the local economy, giving jobs to 500 people, and providing 10 million RMB (approximately USD 1.3 million) per year in tax receipts. Gu said that the fact that the government ultimately awarded the land rights to the church indicates that religious freedom is alive and well in China. It also shows that the Chinese government understands that good Christians make good citizens. As an example of the good work of the Chongyi Church, he mentioned that the previous week the church had sent volunteer teams to the countryside to provide medical services.

¶ 15. (SBU) Deng said that the past 20-30 years has seen the fastest growth of Christianity in all of Chinese history. In 1949, there were 700,000 Protestants in China. In 2004, there were 16 million. After the Cultural Revolution, China's Protestant movement re-started virtually from scratch. Ningbo, on the coast of Zhejiang, was the first city to open a Protestant church. By 2004, there were 50,000 churches and meeting places, or the equivalent of 6.5 new churches and meeting places being added every day. Every year, the Chinese Protestant Church baptizes 60-70,000 new converts. In Zhejiang today, there are 5,000 churches and meeting places.

¶ 16. (SBU) Deng said that the two largest problems facing China's burgeoning Protestant population are the lack of land for meeting places and the lack of trained clergy. To help fill the gap, there are over 7,000 lay clergy in Zhejiang alone. Deng stressed the need to build more seminaries in China. Currently, he noted, 60-70 percent of Chinese Protestant pastors are educated abroad.

¶ 17. (SBU) The Ambassador congratulated Deng on Chongyi church, noting that it was a symbol of the parishioners' faith. He also praised the local government for making the "right decision" to award the land rights to the church instead of the company, noting that the church could play an important role in creating a civil society and in building a harmonious society. He stressed the importance the United States places on religious freedom.

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Bio Comment: Deng Fucun

¶ 18. (SBU) Deng is the chairman of the Zhejiang branch of the China Christian Council. He graduated from St. John's Seminary at Nottingham College in Great Britain. Deng has visited 16 different seminaries in the United States and has visited the United States every year--sometimes up to three times a year--since 1990. His father was an Episcopal priest. Deng speaks and understands English.

SCHUCHAT